

## **Dance Department History Project 2010-2011**

**Transcribed interview of Caroline Prohosky on November 11, 2010**

**Interviewed by Susanne Johnson Davis**

### **When and where did you attend graduate school?**

I attended Brigham Young University and for grad school, UCLA. Between those two, I taught briefly at Rick's College and went on a mission to Argentina.

### **Who were some of your professors?**

Three that really shaped my work life were Sara Lee Gibb, Dee Winterton, and Sandy Allen. Those people had just begun teaching when I was a student and I was fortunate to work with all those people.

### **What do you remember in your years as a student at BYU?**

I remember being a very beginning dance student. I hadn't really studied it growing up, a little bit now and then, a few classes, but my family moved around a lot. What I remember was that I was not going to major in dance. I was going to major in English and just take dance classes for my own enjoyment. I remember all the teachers being so open and inviting and I ended up taking more classes, and getting involved with choreography and performances. Finally, one of my professors, Sara Lee, told me it was getting to be that time to graduate. I thought, "Graduate?" At this point, I was still considering myself an English major, and there were still quite a few classes I had to take. She asked me if I had enough classes in dance, and to be honest, it hadn't even occurred to me to graduate in dance. So we looked over my sheet and I had enough credits to graduate, so I switched my major and became a dance major.

I remember loving the classes. I spent a lot of time in class and everything went so seamlessly. I remember having a lot of freedom and encouragement to dance and choreograph. With Sandy Allen, I choreographed in ballet, and choreographed with Sara Lee and Dee on the modern concerts. I was busy choreographing ballet and modern, and it seemed like there were no limits, just freedom to work creatively.

I remember the summer workshops and thinking all the people who came were very influential. I remember Linda Tarnay, Charles Wideman, and others. There were lots of people working on lots of levels that created great opportunities for students.

### **When did you begin employment at BYU?**

I started in 1986. I don't know who I replaced. I don't know what the situation was when I came. Actually, it might have been Dee. I don't know if they hired anyone between his death and my coming. I don't know for sure, but it might have been Dee.

### **Could you describe the curriculum and methods of teaching you used in your work?**

The curriculum was mostly composition, technique, and working with DancEnsemble students who wanted to choreograph. For methods of teaching, I'm a teacher that likes to be a little distanced from what the students are doing. I really believe that you should let them work out the problems and say as little as possible. In a way, I feel young choreography students don't need to be told everything so much as being encouraged to search out their own answers.

I'm the kind of teacher that likes to ask questions to get the students to think about what they are

doing. That's not to say I don't think it is my place to evaluate them and give them feedback about their projects, because I do feel that is important. But at the same time, I'm a person who is hesitant to give students a whole bunch of what they should do in the creative process. I'd rather just question them and let them search things through. In all the classes I teach, I value discussion. I feel like I am a conversational teacher more than a lecturer.

When we had a graduate program that was my favorite. It gave me the opportunity to sit and watch the students—what they were thinking, what they were writing, what they were saying. Looking back, I feel like that was one of the instances I was at my best. The larger classrooms are fine and I love the students in there, but I felt like my particular teaching ability really resonated in small groups with very intense focus. Doing deep readings, being able to sit, think, and talk; I have to say I miss that. I feel that is one situation that takes advantage of the propensities I have as a teacher.

Where we are now: I obviously really believe in the creative process. I teach primarily composition. Those are tricky classes to teach because I don't want to be heavy handed, but I still want students to learn and think about what they are doing. Every semester is different. I really try and go off the moment, the students, and what is needed, particularly in improvisation. I'm trying every semester to do things that are new, and trying to remaster things that have worked. It is the very depth of students, in which students are vulnerable, in an improvisation class. I really treasure that and work hard to make each class a meaningful class of discovery for them.

The composition class certainly had more of a detailed progression of assignments, obviously. Again, I tried to set the stage for the students so they discover what they need to discover. I try not to be *too* domineering in any way. Yet, I think it is important they gain something from principles. I am strong with that, and I feel I have good media: examples to open their eyes. I'm a teacher who really likes to see people explore.

### **What is the focus of your research and creative work?**

I have to go back to one of my greatest influential moments of choreography. Dee Winterton was talking to me. Some students were doing avant-garde things and I was a little cranky that day. I guess I was overwhelmed by so many energies and not knowing where I fit in. I remember Dee saying it's not that hard to do something bizarre or absurd or decadent or bemoaning man's fate. What is hard is creating something genuinely beautiful, but with a permeating beauty in all its depth. I can't say I took it as an immediate challenge, but those words have stayed in my mind to this day. I remember what I was doing, whatever capability I could muster, I really kept before me what would be beautiful, not pretty, but honest to the feeling and depth of men's needs and desires. I began to treat my choreography that way. I began to reverence the opportunity to work creatively. The students under me were very treasured and catered to me.

I really began to do whatever I was doing to keep a sense of beauty. I read a statement that said, "You cannot depend on correctness and form to create beauty, you must feel it." That is what I've really tried to do. My first work was gothic tracery. For whatever I did or didn't do right, I worked to capture the design of the stained glass window because I thought they were so beautiful. That dance was a changing moment in my career. After that, I constantly tried to understand and find the beautiful kernels of life, especially later when I went into film, because I felt like dance was definitely not having a healthy contact with film.

Even dance in American series was not well-done and compelling. I thought, *Who am I to compel dance to film?* But I felt I should do it. I created a film called "Nocturne," which is about a serious relationship between a husband and wife and physical abuse. That was a challenge to me: *Could I do this project and still let beauty be a part of it?* I worked hard to do that. I've heard people use the word beautiful in talking about the film.

The spirit of the Lord has touched me to fulfill dreams personally and do my choreographic

work. Now I'm on a quest: *Can you deal with any subject matter in a beautiful way?* Interestingly enough, I am recalling words from actor Vincent Price, one of my favorites who played a handsome villain all his life. I went to his lecture, and he talked about the advantages of playing a villain.

During that, he said “You know, people have asked me if we should deal with the darker side of human nature in art.” Of course, we thought he would say yes, but instead he said “If you do it, you must do it with honesty.”

The problem is people depict the darker side of human nature and they do it in a way that they drum it all out and spit it out and say, “Society, look at you; look at what you look like.” Then they walk away.

It's kind of like a doctor who says you're sick and then leaves the room. He said that's what artists tend to do. They create scenes of angst, decadence, and walk away from it. If you do it honestly, then there will be hope woven through what you do because the honest truth is that there is hope. You will know when an actor deals with the darker scenes of hope, because of the way he portrays his character. That was very comforting to me and gave me real encouragement to pursue different layers of dance.

When I came to the last film I worked on, the story of the women in Illinois when the men marched away in the Mormon battalion, that gave me confidence on how to deal with the hardships those women went through, and I knew that it could be done beautifully and honestly. I did not want to gloss over what they had gone through. I wanted it to just be there like the letter of Margaret L. Scott, who was devastated when her brother was killed. She felt there was a promise that people would not die and showed it in that poignant letter she wrote to Brigham Young. I wanted to include those things. My hope is that Vincent Prince's words are true: if you are honest with them, hope will weave through the art. Anyway, here are philosophies we have dealt with.

I hope some of these things pertain to the question about the focus of my creative work, at least the philosophy I have.

Right now, I would like to continue to work with dance and film. There are one or two other films I would like to do. One is Parley P. Pratt because I feel he is a big name but nobody knows the true story of his life. He was murdered and promoted the gospel and was such an energetic missionary, and his life just intrigues me.

The other one is current family dynamics. That's what I'm looking forward to doing. Right now, I'm very involved with working with the college rank advancement committee, working with the documents, preparing the way for faculty members to get their continuing status and rank advancement. I find that as gratifying work mostly because those on the committee are fabulous and brilliant to be around.

### **Do you have any final thoughts about BYU?**

One of the things BYU has given me is obviously the opportunity to work with students, and the opportunity to work and create—encouragement to think and constantly define myself as an individual.

Working with the dancers' company was a great era of traveling. We had international tours every year. I was very blessed to be part of the company at that chapter of time. That was a great journey, helping students to become performers that were not just thrilling but also transcendent in a deeper sense. I remember I got to the point in India where I would look at the cast if we were going to transcend tonight, and they would! They were fabulous, but just taking performance to a much more profound level than being together on the same count—really being able to draw out of each individual performer their sense of fearlessness, their uniqueness, and just a greater range of what they could leave with an audience. I had a lot of great experiences working with the dancers and the choreographers and that has been a very enriching chapter of my life. I don't take it lightly what a great opportunity it has been.